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SUBJECT: CHINESE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS IN THE SOUTH

REF: BANGKOK 4254

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Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, Reasons 1.4 (B) (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. As Chinese television dramas and the prospects for better-paying jobs for Chinese speakers increase, Chinese language learning programs have taken off in the southern Songkhla Province. Along with for-profit cram schools, various Chinese associations there have opened their own language schools. Though interest in Mandarin Chinese is high, supply may have overpaced demand. Nationwide, there are currently more than 350 PRC volunteer teachers in Thai grade schools and universities. The Cross-Strait competition between Beijing and Taipei to influence Thailand's Chinese educational system may be coming to an end -- with the PRC as the victor -- as China plans to conclude a standardized Mandarin Chinese curriculum with the Royal Thai Government (RTG) in the coming year. While enthusiasm has somewhat dimmed for Japanese language classes, interests in learning English remains strong. End summary.

CHINESE: WHO'S LEARNING IT AND WHY?

12. (C) As part of post's ongoing effort to report on the ethnic-Chinese Thai and PRC influence in Thailand, Poloff visited a number of Chinese-language schools in Songkhla Province to explore the rise in Chinese influence on Thai education. This is the second of two cables (reftel).

13. (SBU) Interest in learning Mandarin Chinese has increased dramatically over the past few years in Songkhla Province for both adolescents and their parents. Whereas many of the teenagers cite the desire to understand the ever-popular Chinese television dramas (from both China and Taiwan) as the impetus for their studies, adults and college students want to learn Chinese because of higher-paying job prospects. An increasing number of parents are enrolling their children into Chinese language schools for the latter reason.

14. (C) Besides ethnic-Chinese Thai, ethnic-Thai and a small minority of the ethnic Malay-Muslims students in Songkhla are also enrolling into the Mandarin programs. In Sri Nakhorn (Guo Guang) School, where more than 3,600 students are enrolled from kindergarten through high school, and Mandarin-Chinese is a required "elective" alongside English, about ten percent of its student population are ethnic Malay-Muslims. At Songkhla's Thaksin University's Chinese Department, four of the forty students majoring in Chinese are ethnic Malay-Muslims.

15. (SBU) The increasing popularity of Mandarin Chinese in Songkhla has prompted all thirteen various Chinese associations (reftel) to open up their own Chinese language schools. As a result, the number of Chinese language programs in the province has increased dramatically from five to twenty since 2000. Moreover, the five major Chinese associations joined with the Sri Nakhorn Alumni Association to fund the Sri Nakhorn School, one of the largest "for charity" public schools (from kindergarten to high school) in Hat Yai with a Mandarin Chinese requirement. This school was opened with the intention of providing students from poor families with the means to study both Chinese and English.

16. (C) While the Chinese associations and the Sri Nakhorn School charge very little tuition, Xu Ren Lai, the owner of the Hat Yai Chinese Language Institute, operates his cram school for profit. Xu explained that he is losing money because there are "too many Chinese association schools" that charge far less. However, Xu states that he will continue to operate his cram school because it's become "a personal interest" (his "main business," a packing company, is right next door to the school). Interestingly, many of the schools operated by the different Chinese associations are also in the red. Chang Mu Fa, President of the Taiwanese-Thai Association of Hat Yai, admitted that his association's school, too, was losing money and are dependent upon member contributions. He explained that he intends to continue providing classes because he "wanted to pass on the Chinese cultural and linguistics tradition to the next generation."

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CHOICES: ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS OR THE BOOK FAIRY?

17. (C) As interest rises in Mandarin Chinese, China and Taiwan both appear to view Mandarin training as an opportunity to expand influence. According to Wu Guo Ting, Consul at the Chinese Consulate General in Songkhla, there are "more than 350 volunteers from various Chinese teacher colleges" presently teaching in Thailand. In Sri Nakhorn School alone, there are eighteen freshly-minted Chinese language teachers from Chongqing Normal University. Approximately eight teachers from Yunnan Normal University are currently teaching at the smaller Taihua Middle School, also in Hat Yai. At the university level, Yunnan Normal University recently set up a sister-school 2 year exchange program with Songkhla's Thaksin University, where students study in both provinces.

18. (SBU) Of note, a number of volunteer teachers from China admitted to Poloff in private that they planned to remain in Thailand after their contract terms expire. They believe interests in learning Chinese in Thailand will lead to better job opportunities for them here compared to what awaits them in their native provinces.

19. (C) Whereas the Mainland Chinese are flooding Thailand's Chinese language programs with native speakers, the Taiwanese do not send teachers. Instead, they are distributing, free of charge, as many Chinese language books and curriculum plans as local schools request. New versions of Taiwan's glossy, picture-filled books even use Thai phonetics in their pronunciation guides and feature happy Thai children (instead of Chinese) in the books' illustrations. But as attractive and culturally-sensitive as these books may be, the Thai-Taiwanese Association conceded that the RTG is currently working with the PRC to standardize a national Chinese language curriculum.

WHAT ABOUT ENGLISH?

¶10. (C) The rising interest in learning Chinese does not seem to adversely affect people's desire to learn English. It appears that people are seeing Mandarin Chinese to be the "third language" to add to their resumes. Higher-paying jobs such as tour guides and flight attendants still require English. Employers tend to view Chinese as an added-incentive to hire a particular applicant. Even Sri Nakhorn School, where Chinese signs are juxtaposed against every Thai sign, mandates more English to be taught than Mandarin. Japanese language learning, however, may have suffered a blow in Songkhla. Cin Ang, Lecturer of the Japanese Program at Thaksin University, noted that the number of new students majoring in Japanese has decreased fifty-percent ever since the Chinese language major was established.

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